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A WINNING PITCH

IN LESS THAN A YEAR, SOCCER ALUM MARCO CARRIZALES GOES FROM PLAYER TO FRANCHISE FOUNDER

BY RON WAGNER '93
It's more than a little ironic that Marco Carrizales '16 moved to Greenville from his hometown of Dallas because he was tired of being known as "the soccer guy." That's because right now there may be no bigger soccer guy in Greenville than Carrizales, who has nobody to blame but himself for creating perhaps the hottest soccer ticket the city has ever seen with Greenville FC.

As a first-year member of the National Premier Soccer League, Greenville FC took a community hungry for some high-level soccer to call its own by storm last summer, averaging more than 1,500 fans over eight home matches played at Furman's Eugene Stone Soccer Stadium. In other words, a best-case scenario when Carrizales came up with the idea to build his own franchise from scratch.

"Our fans are probably a lot of people who might not ever go to Furman's campus," Carrizales says. "It's fun to bring new faces into a new stadium I once played in."

Carrizales is president and CEO of the franchise, which competes in the Southeast Conference of the league's Southern Division. Only a couple of years ago, he was a midfielder for Furman men's soccer coach Doug Allison, and if you'd asked him then what he'd be doing today the answer probably wouldn't be this.

Carrizales was a member of Furman's 2015 Southern Conference Tournament Championship team and was drafted in the fourth round of the 2017 Major League Soccer draft by FC Dallas. But a life spent largely on the soccer pitch was upended when he failed to make the squad, leaving Carrizales, like so many athletes, unsure where to go when there aren't any games left to play.

"I didn't earn a contract. My knee was busted up, and I had to determine - do I continue chasing a dream in some random country for two years and see where it takes me, or do I face the music and see what else is out there?" Carrizales says. "My Furman degree helped me immediately after I made the decision not to continue playing soccer."

(Top) Greenville FC fan Ben Goshorn releases a smoke grenade showing the team's colors after a goal.

(Bottom) Greenville FC fans enjoy a match last season at Stone Stadium.
The Comeback

(Top) Greenville FC players take the pitch with members of a local youth team before a match.

(Bottom) Players sign autographs for fans after a game.

A club star throughout his youth in Texas, Carrizales initially returned to Dallas after earning a bachelor’s in communication studies from Furman, but he soon wanted to escape the expectations many had of his playing career.

“Everyone knew me as a soccer player who was drafted by a pro team,” he says. “I just figured Greenville was such a good place for somebody who just got out of college. There were so many job opportunities. It’s a young city. It’s a growing city.”

It’s also one where he had strong connections despite spending only two seasons playing for the Paladins as a transfer from Southern Methodist University. One of those connections was with longtime Greenville businessman and Furman soccer supporter Rick Slagle, who met Carrizales as a player and later offered to let him stay with his family after Carrizales returned to South Carolina.

When he heard Carrizales’ idea for Greenville FC in April 2017, Slagle’s encouragement was based on more than blind allegiance.

“I picked up pretty early that Marco was not your typical college kid. Pretty level-headed, pretty responsible,” Slagle says. “I said, ‘If you think you can raise the family-and-friends money, everything else, you can do. I’m a hundred percent confident you can pull this off.’”

Carrizales hadn’t given himself much time, however. He had about three months to prepare everything the league expansion board required in order to consider the franchise application, which meant Carrizales went from having no job to working almost constantly.

He enlisted the help of his older brother, Richard II, who was an economic analyst in Dallas, and father, Richard, a Dallas attorney, while introducing himself to as many people in Greenville and the league as he could. Carrizales found out quickly that playing on a team does little to prepare you to build one. But help with opening doors from Slagle and other friends of Furman soccer, like...
A Greenville FC player celebrates a goal.
The Comeback

Steve Spinks and Rob Victor '09, was invaluable.

"You have to have a built-out business model from your naming ideas to how you're going to operate - business structure, venue, training site - just tons of boxes you've got to check off before you submit anything," Carrizales says. 

"Once I did, they held it for two, two-and-a-half months and went through every single page I submitted."

The league liked what it saw, and in November 2017, Greenville FC was officially invited to join. That was the good news. The bad was that now the work started over again, starting with finding a coach and followed by building a roster. Having Furman as a home stadium was a big bonus for recruiting players, one few other teams would have had the option to use.

"I would not have done it if it was not for the field, and I don't want it to get overused for our varsity programs," says Allison, who has led Furman to eight NCAA tournaments in 22 years. "I went to Athletics Director Mike Buddie and said, 'I really do want to support this guy. He's one of ours. He'll respect the field. He'll respect the program, and he'll take care of the place.'"

More than 2,000 fans poured into the 3,000-seat Stone Stadium for the home opener, and virtually from the start the Milltown Operatives - Greenville FC's "unofficial/official" supporters group - gave the matches an atmosphere that would make a European club team proud. The dedication to revelry included banging drums, flags, colorful costumes and loud marches into the stadium.

"In the Greenville community, people want to embrace
The Comeback

“IN THE GREENVILLE COMMUNITY, PEOPLE WANT TO EMBRACE AND HELP OTHER PEOPLE. AND SOCCER FOR GREENVILLE – IT WAS THE RIGHT TIME.”

and help other people,” Slagle says. “And soccer for Greenville – it was the right time.”

Part of the enthusiasm for Greenville FC certainly came from that pent-up desire for local soccer, but maybe the biggest part is the result of Carrizales’ tireless dedication to building a fan base. Social media is a big part of that, as is reaching out to the entire community.

A Mexican-American, Carrizales made it a point to connect with Hispanics living in the Greenville area, right down to social media pages written entirely in Spanish.

The result has been a large and enthusiastic presence at matches.

“We’ve been really intentional in marketing to all different communities,” Carrizales says. “I don’t speak Spanish, but my parents are both fluent in it. We’re seeing that it’s working. There was actually a Spanish TV outlet at a match.”

“This is a great way to bring people onto campus who have never been to campus before,” Allison says. “And he’s done an amazing job with that. The fan support is just amazing during games.”